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Carrie Gray

University of Southern Mississippi

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A Passionate Return to the Original Purpose of Higher Education

Carrie Gray

Catalyst Staff Writer

Service-learning may now be a little-known movement at The University of Southern Mississippi, but soon many students will be familiar with it. Service-learning is an attempt to return the university to its original standards of teaching students to become informed, critical citizens actively involved in bettering the community. Service-learning may seem to be a trend because its true purpose is misunderstood and even widely unknown by the bulk of the student population.

However, at Southern Miss, several organizations are striving to change these misconceptions and spread knowledge about service-learning.

To truly understand service-learning, one must understand the initial design of the university. According to Dr. Lisa Langstraat, the director of composition at USM and the teacher of many service-learning classes, "In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the focus of the university was not employment or vocational training. The notion of higher learning centered on citizenship and training students for participating in a democracy."

Many of today's universities mold students to fit into a certain job slot, instead of equipping them to individually be citizens who can reason and think critically skills that are

necessary for a functioning democracy.

Service-learning aids in the revival of the university's democratic mission. Langstraat states that the best way to introduce the new idea of service-learning to students is to "offer a definition by way of what it is not: it is not volunteerism and charity. These imply one-way giving and no getting back." Service-learning gives and receives. It is an exchange of knowledge, service, and education,

which can only be understood when students dare to rethink the conception of the role of the university and themselves as students, and as citizens.

When I arrived at Southern Miss, I believed that college was meant to prepare me for a career. That idea was drastically altered through my

experience with service-learning. I worked at an after-school garden project for an at-risk neighborhood; I planted flowers with children and helped them understand the growing process. My other classmates worked at similar community organiza-

tions. My class encompassed many characteristic elements of service learning classes; we learned about

democracy, literacy, poverty, and the role of the university from assigned readings. We also kept journals about our experiences in the community and how our classroom learning guided our service, and we used our knowledge to write for the community.



Service-learning students work in the Garden Project.

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At first, I struggled greatly in my service-learning class as I realized that I was not at school to be trained for a job, but I was at school to learn how to become a critical and active citizen. Many times I was confused and frustrated because what I learned in class and saw in my service experiences contradicted previous misconceptions I held about poverty, literacy, and democracy. Overall, though, my encounter with service-learning was extremely fulfilling because for the first time I felt that what I learned in class had a real-life importance and application in the community.

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Service-learning must be an extension of what is learned in class. It must benefit the students' education as it improves the community through its service. It elaborates on classroom knowledge as a new way of learning. "Service-learning is not just learning disembodied theory," states Langstraat, "but it is combining abstract ideas and new experience to come up with new knowledge." Its purpose is to create impassioned citizens out of university students and fulfill the community's needs. According to Langstraat, a good citizen is "someone who is familiar, on an intimate and personal level, with the problems facing the community, who also knows the strengths of the community and possesses a variety of perspectives on issues to make informed decisions." Service-learning offers students a way to gain this intimate perspective.

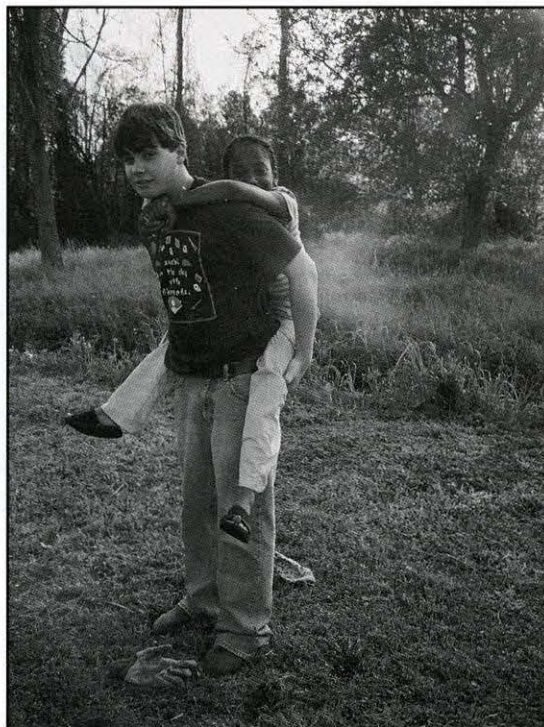
Students need to be informed on the progress of service-learning at Southern Miss; intensive efforts are making the educational benefits of this learning technique available to more students and classes. John Wyble is the assis-

tant director of the Office of Community Service Learning (OCSL), which is the liaison between students and the community, and a resource center where students can receive information about volunteerism, service learning, and community organizations.

Presently the OCSL is working with the Office of Technology Resources (OTR) to create an educational Web site about service learning. Service-learning links will be available at the site, as well as the ability for student organizations, students, and faculty to submit service-learning experiences and information to update the OCSL.

Students can use this Web site to learn about service learning, especially after their curiosity is roused with the newly appearing "SL" indication by service-learning classes on the S.O.A.R. registration for spring 2003. This designation alerts students of the availability of service-learning classes. According to John Wyble, stu-

dents should be aware that "service-learning classes require the extra time that any hands-on learning requires, such as group projects or research papers." By this new differentiation of service-learning classes on S.O.A.R., students can choose and be prepared for what service learning demands. Almost as widely used as S.O.A.R. is the campus newspaper, *The Student Printz*, which soon will be featuring a regular column on service-learning in order to keep the student population informed about progress and achievements in the area of service-learning.



A service-learning student gives a new friend a piggy-back ride.

The OCSL Web site, the designation of service-learning classes on S.O.A.R., and the service-learning column in *The Printz* are all new

developments of Southern Miss to increase students' knowledge of and experiences with service-learning. Southern Miss is presently the regional resource center for service-learning, and, according to John Wyble, this program is one of USM's distinguishing features. Southern Miss is already a service-learning leader, but soon the university will be making service-learning history. The Center for Community and Civic Engagement (CCCE) is a statewide organization that creates service-learning partnerships between Mississippi schools and communities; its only office is located at Southern Miss. The CCCE and OCSL are both sponsoring the Gulf South Summit in February 2003 at USM's Gulf Coast Campus. Expected at this conference are more than 300 college and university service-learning professionals. The goal of the Summit is to develop a regional network between service-learning institutions.

In the future, students at Southern Miss will have many opportunities to impact the community through experiences with service-learning. Already, people have noticed a heightened presence of the university in the community, especially in the past six to seven years. John Wyble credits this to the efforts of the OCSL, an organization students created in the early 1990s. Under the leadership of the director of Union and Student Activities, Barbara Ross, the OCSL gained a professional staff and expanded its outreach into the Pine Belt area. John Wyble believes that infiltrating the Southern Miss campus with dedicated students trained for community service is one way USM is making "long-term investments in developing leaders in the community."

What service-learning offers most, and what makes it most intriguing and enticing, is its ability to stir passion within each of us as it stretches our learning in new directions. In Langstraat's opinion, "service-learning provides the passion of being engaged, and even confused, but at least it's not static. College is all about challenging, teaching, and pushing our understanding in new directions; it's not about reaffirming what we already know."

I agree with Langstraat; I experienced the pas-

sion, confusion, and challenges that she associates with service-learning, but in the end, I realized many things. In my first experience in service-learning, I awoke to the meaning of the university and my role as a student, learner, server, and ultimately, a citizen. In service-learning we find exactly this engagement, challenges, passion, but also new knowledge from enlightening experiences. ♦

About the Author

Carrie Gray is an USM Honors College Presidential Scholar. She is a sophomore English major with a 3.9 GPA. She works as a tutor in the Writing Center in The University of Southern Mississippi's Department of English. Gray is also a Bible study leader with the Baptist Student Union, and will participate in The Abbey Program in Pontlevoy, France, in the spring. Gray is also an Honors College ambassador.



For more information about service-learning, call the Office of Community Service Learning at (601) 266-5074. Write to The OCSL, Box 5067 Hattiesburg, MS 39406-5067 or send an e-mail to Volunteer@usm.edu.